One of the age-old problems in a democracy is that votes may be limited to one vote per person, but wealth and income can be highly unequal. One of the efforts to overcome this inequality was the Minnesota campaign finance system that existed a generation ago, when I was a candidate for the state House of Representatives. It could be a model for the nation, except...

In my first election, 1988, I narrowly defeated a three-term incumbent, Alan Quist, by a 51%-49% margin. I defeated him again, almost as narrowly, in 1990. In 1992 redistricting pitted me against another incumbent, four-term member Sal Frederick. I cut it really close, winning by only 50.1% to 49.9% (38 votes out of a total of 16,000). In these three highly contested campaigns I spent about $22,000-$25,000 in each election, the legal spending limit that increased a little every two years. My opponents spent the same amount. The limit was important for three reasons. First, the limit was high enough for a challenger to reach voters and
defeat an incumbent, as I did in my first election; incumbents have name identification and other advantages, and excessively low spending limits are “incumbent protection.” Second, the limit was low enough to be within reach for a well organized candidate. Third, it was also low enough that rich candidates could not overwhelm their opponents. In my third contest I could have been buried if my opponent Sal Frederick, who owned the Happy Chef restaurant chain, had been able to use his large fortune against me.

In none of the contests did I have to use my own money in order to reach the spending limit. This was fortunate, because at that time I didn’t have a lot to spare, living on a Gustavus salary with a wife and three children. Most of the money for the campaigns of both sides came from small, individual contributions, almost none over $100, encouraged by a state rebate program. In the first campaign I had the help of two gatherings organized for me by two of my fellow St. Peter school board members (they loved to throw parties!). In the two subsequent campaigns I needed only to send out a letter to previous donors. The state government also helped out with funds from the income tax checkoff for political parties. Consequently, I spent very little time on fund-raising, leaving me lots of time to talk with voters.

Unfortunately, the system does not work nearly as well as it did thirty years ago. In competitive state legislative contests today the candidate’s official campaign can be drowned out by political parties, interest groups, corporations and others spending hundreds of thousands of dollars. The major reason is a series of Supreme Court decisions equating money with speech (“Citizens United”), viewing corporations as persons (entitled to free speech and other rights), and naively overlooking “independent” and party expenditures. Also, while the campaign finance reforms were originally established through a bipartisan effort at the national and state levels, the Republican party has changed from support to opposition, hindering the legislative effort to overcome the judicial obstacles.

However, parties can change; look at the Republican party over the past five years. The Supreme Court can also change; despite the doctrine of precedent, during my lifetime the Court has changed on questions of race, cruel and unusual punishment, guns, gay rights (the list goes on). Campaign finance reform is a subject important enough to be worth the fight.
In Comparison...

In the 2020 election cycle for MN district 19A (St. Peter), challenger Susan Akland (R) narrowly defeated incumbent Jeff Brand (DFL) by 108 votes (out of 23,180 votes cast). Akland reported contributions of $45,136 and expenditures of $70,260. Brand reported contributions of $19,965 and expenditures of $39,595.

Listen Up!

Have you heard about the Gustavus podcast Learning for Life @ Gustavus? Check out these episodes featuring political science faculty, students, and alumni.

- Professor Jill Locke
  S.1 E.8 “Shame Shame Shame”

- Nathan Baring ’22
  S.2 E.8: Young People’s Climate Change Lawsuit

- Professor Mimi Gerstbauer
  S.4 E.5: Peace and Reconciliation

- Joel Johnson ’96
  S.6 E.4: “Democracy Requires an Argument”

- Emily Joan Falk ’22
  S.8, E.3: “I Want to Be Able to Do the Right Thing”
Christopher Ortiz '22 is the winner of the Christenson Scholarship. This scholarship is awarded to a junior political science major judged exemplary in the excellence, depth, and imagination of their academic performance in political science and who has a demonstrated interest in public service. Christopher was involved in the Voter Engagement Team and participates in Model UN and speech and debate. He was selected as a fellow for the Public Policy and International Affairs program and he plans to pursue a Master’s degree in International Relations.

The two winners of this year’s Political Science Writing Award are:


Ben Menke '22 for, “Next Steps for the Democratic Party,” written for Political Parties and Elections. Ben is a junior, majoring in political science and statistics.

More Good News

GUSTAVUS RECOGNIZED AS VOTER FRIENDLY CAMPUS

NATHAN BARING NAMED FINALIST FOR TRUMAN SCHOLARSHIP

GUSTAVUS JUNIOR ACCEPTED INTO PUBLIC SERVICE FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM
When I arrived at Gustavus in 2001 I had big dreams to make a difference in the world. Growing up in a small rural town of Maine, teaching and coaching running and skiing was how I thought I could make the world a better place. Then I took The Politics of Homelessness with Professor Leitch and my eyes opened to the reality and potentialities of how policy makes huge differences in the lives of so many. My path was reoriented, and I set forth on that path while still in school.

That revelation thus began my path to where I am now serving as the Chief of Mission in Malaysia for the UN Migration Agency- the International Organization for Migration (IOM). I oversee UN migration related activities in the country.

For IOM this includes organizing refugee placement - helping the most vulnerable people travel in health and dignity to a safe fresh start in a new country of resettlement. IOM also meets the needs of people displaced by natural or manmade disasters directly at home in a variety of ways tailored to the needs and gaps of the situation.

On the policy front we support governments on migration management, improved safety, security, and fairness for labor migrants, mitigation and prevention of human trafficking, and working on linkages between public health and migration, particularly when seen against the backdrop of the pandemic. Well managed migration upholds state sovereignty, but also ensures human rights are respected in both spirit and practice.

These cumulative experiences have brought me to a keen realization of the importance and impacts that
implementation of good migration policy, or not, can have on so many people across the world. One in seven human beings are, have been or will be a migrant: affecting every corner of society.

Today we are engulfed in the COVID-19 pandemic, grounding regular migration to a halt. Yet we still see a government’s decision to provide free vaccines to migrants and refugees in the country not only saves the lives of those migrants, helps protect citizens that live near the migrants, and allows the factories where the migrants work to continue at full operations to make PPE for use across the world. Having policies and programs for orderly migration, whether through established refugee resettlement programs, or legal entry for migrant workers due to a shortage of citizens to work in agriculture or factories make such a difference! My Gustavus experience helped open my eyes to international relations, politics, and led me to a career where I’m fortunate to work in the UN where I support governments, migrants and NGOs to promote well managed migration that makes life better for all of us, especially the most vulnerable.

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Most political science courses met in person this spring, though a handful remained entirely online. Students and faculty learned to adjust to teaching and learning while wearing a facemask and maintaining six feet of distance between one another. The COVID case count on campus remained relatively low throughout the spring semester thanks to the diligence of the campus community.

Thank You!

Reine Ndayisaba ’21 and Paige Patterson ’21 were selected by political science faculty to serve as Department Assistants for 2021-22 academic year, an award that also comes with the responsibility of helping to facilitate department initiatives, like our Friday Forum series and this newsletter.
CELEBRATING SENIORS

Congratulations to the class of 2021!

MADELYN SMERILLO

I loved asking Leitch how he started wearing crocs... I’ve asked him at least twice to my recollection and both times I swear the story was different.

PAIGE PATTERSON

I have always loved debating different issues in classes, whether part of a mock Security Council, Public Policy debate, or Model UN Conference. The poli sci cohort is so close knit, passionate, and intelligent that it always made for lively discussions!

CARTER GRUPP

A favorite memory for me is when Professor Knutson took her classes to the capitol as well as to the St. Peter city council meeting.
I always remember the brownies Chris Gilbert brought to every U.S. Government and Analyzing Politics exam to give us a sweet treat reward for finishing it! Even more rare than that was when he made the Manhattan Project chocolate cake recipe and brought it in for my FTS class.

My highlight would definitely be going to the capital building and learning more about my plans from alumni who had similar interests as me. Plus there was free food :).

I’ll remember Leitch making the transition from in-person to online school more engaging.
Ellie Anderson
Conor Beckel
Gunnar Bosking
Chelsea Boyden
Amanda Braun
John Campisi
Maryn Cella
Hailey Concepcion
Susan Cook
Evelyn Doran
Sophia Gottlick
Hannah Gronseth
Carter Grupp
Zachary Johnson
Elizabeth Johnson
Samuel Jones III
Sara Kasel
Ingrid Kubisa
Nolan Larson
Molly Lewis
Adam Lohr-Pearson
Ashley Magno
Reine Ndayisaba
Paige Patterson
Charles Schnettler
Parker Sisler
Joshua Slaughter
Madelyn Smerillo
Nicholas Summers
Riley Wentink